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SUBJECT: GOR EFFORTS TO ADVANCE MULTIPOLAR WORLD IN
RUSSIA-INDIA-CHINA PARTNERSHIP

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns for
reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. Summary: While Russian officials view the October ministerial in Harbin as a "pivotal event" in accelerating the formation of a Russia, India, and China (RIC) triangle, fundamental differences in strategic vision, mutual distrust, and differing relations with the U.S. significantly limit Russia's ability to make RIC an important component of FM Lavrov's multipolar world. While Russia will continue to play all angles in checking perceived American unilateralism, RIC appears to be more about process than substance and a poor substitute for Moscow's lack of long-term strategic vision, especially vis-a-vis China. End summary.

RIC Ministerial in Harbin a "Pivotal" Event

12. (C) Dmitry Zhirnov, China Desk Deputy Chief and MFA Troika specialist, underscored that the October ministerial in Harbin, China, was a "watershed moment" in the development of RIC. Although RIC foreign ministers have met on seven previous occasions since 2002, the Harbin ministerial was the first time the foreign ministers gathered only to discuss trilateral cooperation.

13. (C) Zhirnov said that RIC foreign ministers made a decision in Harbin to shift from "pure rhetoric to concrete cooperation, but spelled out an agenda that was long on process but short on substance:

-- Establish a coordination mechanism: RIC foreign ministers agreed to establish a coordination group at the MFA working level (department director) that would meet "frequently" to prepare for ministerials and monitor the implementation of decisions on specific issues. The coordination mechanism also aims to establish common approaches and strategies for the "democratization" of international affairs and the achievement of greater respect for international law and collective action. Zhirnov conceded that the coordination of views on issues of global concern would largely be confined to the issuance of general statements, but maintained that Russia would nonetheless use this group to highlight and promote the need for greater multilateral diplomacy.

-- Collaborate on concrete projects: the relevant ministries of each country will meet regularly to develop specific proposals for further cooperation in the spheres of agriculture, emergency situations, and public health. Also, academics and business leaders from each country will continue to meet regularly to deepen the cultural and economic ties. Moscow recently hosted an "academic circle" on possible ways to advance RIC, and New Delhi plans to host a conference on regional investment projects for

entrepreneurs in December.

-- Strengthen cooperation with SCO: the foreign ministers underscored the importance of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in the context of addressing the challenges in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Although India is an official observer in the SCO, Zhirnov said the Indian foreign minister agreed India would work with Russia and China in the SCO as if it were a "de facto member" to tackle the resurgence of the Taliban and violent extremism, drug trafficking, and political instability in Afghanistan.

¶4. (C) MFA International Institutions Section Chief Timur Avyazov and MFA North America Department multilateral cooperation specialist Mark Rybakov acknowledged that Russia is the "catalyst" in RIC -- and in the less-developed Brazil-Russia-India-China (BRIC) partnership initiative. However, they insisted that China and India similarly view RIC as a project with "strong potential." In economic terms alone, the combined economic activity of the three countries represents 24.4 percent of the world GDP (China makes up 15.5 percent of this figure).

American "Unilateralism" Tops RIC Agenda

¶5. (C) Despite MFA protestations that RIC is not anti-American and that the U.S. was not mentioned during the Harbin ministerial, Zhirnov acknowledged that "everyone in the room knew what country we were talking about." Zhirnov said that a fundamental concern of Russia, China, and India continues to be the "unilateral" U.S. approach to foreign affairs, and RIC emerged in part as a response to this common concern.

¶6. (C) Leading experts such as MGIMO Vice Rector Aleksey Bogaturov agree that the "glue" in RIC is the "anti-American factor." Analysts tell us that the perceived reluctance of the U.S. to accept Russia as an equal member of the "club" has prompted Russia to seek stronger political ties with India and China, if only "as an insurance policy" against further deterioration in relations with the West. Economic interdependence and the sweeping trends of globalization preclude the possibility of a sever in ties between Russia and the West, but analysts say fundamental disagreements over political and security-related issues have "forced" the GOR to show the U.S. and EU that Russia "has options." In this respect, RIC, much like SCO, the Cooperation and Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and other regional groupings serve as a "signal" that the U.S. cannot continue to encroach on Russian national and strategic interests -- particularly in Russia's neighborhood -- without facing some kind of reaction.

...And There Isn't Much Else There

¶7. (C) There is little reason to believe that the ground realities that doomed former Prime Minister Primakov's Russia-India-China "triangle" have changed, with most experts assessing that the current version of RIC remains a moribund project. Concern over U.S. foreign policy on certain issues is hardly a worthwhile rallying call and it is doubtful that Russia will be able to push China and India into a Moscow-driven strategic partnership. There are at least three fundamental obstacles to further development of Russia's RIC concept:

-- Differences in strategic vision: Russia in Global Affairs Editor Fedor Lukyanov told us that India, China, and even Russia recognize U.S. leadership on key foreign policy concerns, but, unlike Russia, China and India have little desire to take on the responsibilities and commitments of a global power. New Eurasia Foundation President Andrey Kortunov added that there is still a significant gap between the aspirations and capability of Russian foreign policy; India and China, if only for historical reasons, do not have

this problem.

-- Competition versus cooperation: Even MFA officials agreed that the degree of distrust between China and India is considerable and acknowledged the "regrettable but intense" competition between Russia and China for resources and influence in Central Asia. Several analysts, including IMIMO's Sergey Oznobishov and Council for National Strategy's Stanislav Belkin, argued that, despite the rhetoric, Russia views China as more of a long-term threat than the U.S. Accordingly, the GOR aims to use RIC as a mechanism for keeping Russia's "enemy" close to its side.

-- Bilateral relationships with the U.S.: Perhaps most importantly, Russian analysts posit that each member of RIC values its bilateral relationship with the U.S. more than their trilateral relationship. The MFA told us that the GOR is fully aware that China and India remain unwilling to sacrifice their political, economic, and (especially with India) security relationships with the U.S. Bogaturov and analyst Vitaly Portnikov added that although Russian leaders would never admit it, the GOR will not take any serious step to undermine Russia's long-term ties with the U.S.

Comment

18. (C) Russian's oft-repeated calls for the "democratization of international relations" and the recognition of multiple poles in international affairs are primarily an expression of Russia's deep dissatisfaction with the perceived unequal relationship with the West. At best, the RIC concept is a continuation of Russia's diplomatic tradition to play all the angles: develop closer relations with anybody and everybody, especially those not firmly tied to the West. In its efforts to counterbalance the U.S. and Europe, Russia's approach to both RIC and SCO seems short-sighted; the long-term rise of China could easily lead to these two organizations being driven from Beijing rather than Moscow.
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